

Phoenix Lake to get improvement funds

Written by [Lenore Rutherford, The Union Democrat](#) January 27, 2010 11:52 am

A plan to improve Phoenix Lake is back on track after being sidelined by state budget problems in December 2008.

Tuolumne Utilities District directors agreed Tuesday night to amend the 2009-10 budget to allocate \$50,000 toward planning for it as long as the Sierra Nevada Conservancy comes up with matching funds in the same amount.

A group of volunteers making up the Phoenix Lake Task Force has been working for more than a decade to promote improvements at the lake, which is part of Tuolumne Utilities District's water storage system.

TUD provides drinking water for most of Tuolumne County.

Task force chairman LeRoy Bushart, of Phoenix Lake, said the board and the public will be happy when the project is finally finished. It will include cutting deep channels into the lake and completely dredging it.

"It should restore the lake to its original capacity, and even beyond that," he said.

At its historic peak, the lake could hold more than 800 acre-feet of water, but now it holds only about 600 acre-feet of water.

In addition to water storage, the improvements are expected to increase wildlife habitat, get rid of algae and provide public access to the lake.

The state's Sierra Nevada Conservancy awarded a grant to the district in December 2008 to pay for half of a \$200,000 study on how to improve the storage capacity and water quality of Phoenix Lake.

However, the funding was immediately placed on hold because of the state's fiscal crisis, so the district's share was not included in its current budget.

Issues identified at the time included fire-prone meadows filled with reeds; sediment oozing into the lake 10 to 20 times faster than normal; an overgrown aquatic weed beneath the surface; and Sullivan Creek water contaminated by failing septic systems flowing into it.

In December 2009, the district was told the money would be released.

General Manager Pete Kampa said Tuesday he only asked for half of the district's share to be

paid out of the 2009-10 budget because that's the most work he expects to be completed by the end of the fiscal year, June 30.

He said it is very important to move ahead with planning the project so it will be shovel ready if and when money becomes available.

"This is an apple pie and motherhood project," said John Buckley of the Central Sierra Environmental Re-source Center, speaking as a rate payer and member of the task force.

"It is so important for Tuolumne County and the Community. Once it gets rolling, there is the potential for other money to become available for it," he said.

TUD Director Barbara Balen called Phoenix Lake an "environmental treasure" that needs to be preserved, much like the county's ditch system.